

*Ruritania Today: Representations of the
Balkans in Contemporary British and
American Literature*

Jelige: Ruritania

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Orientalising the Balkans: imaginary colonisation</i>	7
<i>Mastery through definition</i>	8
<i>Taming the Other: Infantilisation</i>	11
<i>Fear of the Other: The tropes of paranoia, infection and sexuality</i>	18
<i>Who are we talking about? – The gothic mode and the discourse of Balkanisation</i>	26
<i>Conclusion</i>	31
<i>Works Cited</i>	32

Introduction

I want to start this essay with a question. What is the Balkan Peninsula? One would assume that this is a question concerning geography, and one would also assume that geography, as an objective discipline, is able to provide an accurate answer. Both assumptions may turn out to be problematic when one considers the following maps.



What is obvious is the lack of consensus as to where the borders of the peninsula might be, or which countries belong to it; on the other hand, the sheer number of attempts at a geographical definition and delimitation indicates a constant need for containment and control. Why is it so important to settle and fix these debated borderlines? In her book entitled *Imagining the Balkans*,

Maria Todorova argues that, as soon as the word ‘Balkan’ emerged as a geographical notion, it immediately became heavily loaded with cultural, political and ideological meanings expanding its signified beyond the realm of geography. (Todorova 21) On hearing the word “Balkan,” a host of associations come into one’s mind - a wide range of stereotypes from the collective memory of European culture: rural backwardness, wars, violence, rich folklore, pastoral idyll, sublime nature, and the list could be continued. It is not even Europe. How could it be when its peoples know nothing of the values (reason, progress, democratic values, humanism, the ideals of the Enlightenment) that have constituted to the greatness of Europe?

The word has acquired a dubious reputation even though it is not old – but then, neither is the region as a distinct and identifiable area, at least in Western history and travel writing. Maria Todorova found that Western Europe started to discover “Turkey in Europe” in the 18th century, mainly for two reasons: as a result of studying the historical remains of classical antiquity on the spot, and due to the birth of tourism. Even though the area was populated mainly by Christians, the long Ottoman rule had evidently defined its inhabitants as the ‘Oriental Other’, reinforcing the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. There is no need to emphasize the role of borders in defining the self and creating a stable identity by excluding what the self is not, or does not want to be. In this sense, individual and collective identities are produced in similar ways: “the borderline is a boundary of cultural identity, demarcating the outer limits of the self and the commencement of an alterity that is experienced as a sudden shock.” (Hammond 20) Andrew Hammond goes on to claim that Europe’s distressing awareness of being part of Eurasia, without any clear-cut geographical perimeter dividing it from the large landmass, resulted in drawing up imaginary borders of Western culture as close to its heart as possible, often going as far as to exclude parts of what is indubitably European territory in their attempt to see the imaginary Other as a distant threat. This process of identity formation by means of exclusion rhymes with the European use of the “primitive” cultural practice of fetishism as a way of othering cultural practice, as described by Laura U. Marks in her book, *The Skin of the Film*. According to her, the term was first applied to describe peasant superstitions and Catholic rituals inside Europe by the Protestant, protocapitalist layer of society. This way they could reaffirm their belief that “unlike themselves, these groups were irrational, incapable of abstraction, and mired in the body.” (Marks 87) In order to consolidate the identity that is based on reason and the intellect, the bourgeoisie, the dominant Western class, needed to project its own unacceptable excesses on the

‘Other’. As a result of colonisation, “an even more “primitive” other became available for the disgusted/desiring projections of the European middle classes. Thus, in some ways, the forbidden object of desire is already an intercultural one, for the desire that the bourgeoisie had forbidden itself became embodied in primitivist fantasies.” (Marks 87) A parallel may be drawn between the process of intellectual colonisation and the mechanisms of fetishisation: the “Other” that emerged in the wake of establishing the imaginary borders of Europe’s body has been a source of constant fascination and a sense of threat at the same time.

As Edward Said argues in his *Orientalism*, the first object of the European othering gaze was the ever expanding Islamic world that was referred to as the ‘Orient’. (Said 131) The proximity of an alien culture, religion and its military success constituted a serious threat to the existence of the Christian West. However, European colonization, armed with the ideas of the Enlightenment, reversed the situation. The gaze (and hands) reached farther to explore and exploit. The “backwardness” of the modern East, compared to its former glory manifested in ancient works of art, compelled the Europeans to take upon themselves the noble task of civilising the East and restore it to its former glory by adapting it to European culture. In the course of this process, the coloniser naturally described and defined what he saw - or what he wanted to see. In the wake of the Napoleonic expeditions to Egypt, the late 18th century saw a basic change in the language of Orientalism. From a “style of representation” (Said 87), it developed into a scientific discourse, a means of creation; and then, from scientific discourse into an important instrument of colonisation.

The Other is passive. The Other is unable to speak, and therefore constantly needs the agency of the active coloniser. It would clearly be unable to act or speak for itself, considering its intellectual backwardness, its laziness, its aggressive, unruly proclivities. The other is feminine, humming her unceasing siren song into the ears of the Europeans, luring them into moral decay and death. It only has a body as opposed to the intellect and spirit of the West. These are some of the dominant tropes and stereotypes of European discourses of othering, tropes which colonisers equipped themselves with for their mission to justify their presence or explain their anxiety. This discourse of othering and distancing was applied to the Oriental Other, something that was seen to be far away, at a safe distance from the self, with which European powers - especially Britain - stood in a direct economical, political relationship. However, the stereotypes of Orientalism found their way back, in slightly modified or slightly extended versions, to suit Europe’s other

within. As Said notes, far-away colonies never awakened fear in the imperial centres. Europe treated the East with the pride of the owner beholding his property. (Said 131) As opposed to this, the Balkans lay crouched in their “back garden,” causing constant anxiety about identity, and making externalisation rather problematic.

According to Todorova, three nations have predominated in creating and perpetuating the myth of the Balkans as Other, namely France, Britain and the United States. The most astonishing characteristic of this myth is that it has hardly changed over the centuries, with its components reproducing themselves with a stubborn virulence in ever newer texts. In the present essay I shall explore some of the features of the present state of these stereotypes, drawing on contemporary British and American fiction and journalism, focusing mainly on two novels: Malcolm Bradbury’s *Rates of Exchange*, published in 1983 and *Lie in the Dark* published in 1999 by Dan Fesperman. *Rates of Exchange* is set in an imaginary Eastern European country called Slaka (continuing the long tradition of imaginary Eastern European or Balkan countries in British literature¹) where the protagonist, a professor of English linguistics, arrives to give lectures on the English language. Fesperman’s story, published in 1999, takes the reader to the middle of war-torn Sarajevo. Its protagonist, Investigator Petric desperately clings to his job as a homicide investigator in the middle of large-scale killing. In my view, the latter text is more prone to reproducing existing preconceptions, while Bradbury’s novel seeks to subvert them by raising questions clad into comedy.

¹The most famous of these is Anthony Hope’s Ruritania in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (though he created other fictitious countries in his later novels), which was followed by numerous others, for example, Brigid Brophy’s *A Palace Without Chairs*, Dorothea Gerald’s *The Red-Hot Crown*, John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, or Agatha Christie’s *The Secret of the Chimneys*

Orientalising the Balkans: imaginary colonisation

It was in the 17th century that the British had established permanent diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire, but information did not really start to flow until the 18th century. Due to the incredible popularity of travel writing in Britain from the 18th century onward, the British became probably the most important agents of establishing and disseminating particular attitudes for a relatively wide, even international public. “Remarkable in the English accounts of the time was the conscious attempt to reach an “objective” verdict for the differences in civilization.” (Todorova 91) Naturally, to take on this task one needs to assume a vantage point above the “civilisations” observed that makes such comparison possible. This observation point, as Vesna Goldsworthy argues, is Englishness itself: while Balkan people want to be perceived as European, the British see Europe itself as corrupt and inferior to “Englishness.” This led to a paradoxical representational predicament, something which distinguishes the British discourse of the Balkans from continental strategies of representation. In British travel writing and literature, the Balkans tends to embody the most exotic as well as the most typical aspects of Europe. (Goldsworthy 9) Also, if we consider the proliferation of British travelogues in the light of the fact that this nation possessed the largest empire in history, it is less surprising that the discourse of colonialism was applied to describe a region that had never been directly under British economic or political control. Its closeness to the ultimate Other of the “civilised West”, the Orient, was enough for the British to perceive the Balkans as tainted, and try to relegate it to the East.

Still, the question arises: tainted by whom? To answer this, let us first consider Michael Foucault’s argument in *Madness and Civilisation* where he defines madness as the other of reason, something that must be externalised in order to sustain the integrity of reason. “[There is] an otherness at work within reason for that of a repressed alterity existing outside or beyond it. If madness or the other is always inside, then this means that it is always already a part of reason or the same; but it will also be exactly the element that reason is unable to comprehend, and will therefore work disruptively.” (Foucault qtd. in Young 72) What is frustrating about the Balkans is that despite the effort to relocate it on the imaginary map, it is still part of Europe. However, as such, it serves to condense and embody all the undesirable qualities and excesses that would otherwise burden the Self and disrupt the ideal identity it wants to possess. In the section that

follows, I shall enumerate some of the fantasies and characteristics that comprise the intellectual colonisation of the Balkans and Eastern Europe, focusing on the most successful colonizer - Britain.

Mastery through definition

The act of naming presupposes a sense of power over the entity named. The word Balkan, we learn from Todorova, first appeared in British accounts around the end of the 18th century to designate the mountain range stretching across Bulgaria. This must have been an obvious misunderstanding, since the expression “Bal.Kan,” which the traveller John Morritt caught from the locals’ speech is a Turkish word for mountain. Besides, the range already had a well known name of Greek origin, Haemus, also familiar to Morritt himself. Nevertheless, the new expression has proved to be the more enduring during the following centuries, causing the original name to gradually fade from usage. Moreover, as Western Europe discovered that “Turkey in Europe,” far from being a homogeneous part of the Ottoman Empire, had a distinct and varied physiognomy of its own, this new and exotic name was at hand to refer to the whole region². This preference for the exotic sounding Turkish name over the ancient Greek (from where European culture traditionally originates itself) is arguably one of the most crucial gestures of the exoticisation of the peninsula.

The opening paragraphs of the present essay as well as the accompanying maps demonstrated the vagueness that pervades the use of “Balkan” even as a geographical category, suggesting a radical instability of the signifying process. The signifier was immediately detached from its signified, or rather had never had a purely geographical one. Similarly to the Orient as it exists in the Western mind, its landscape is largely imaginary (although while the Balkans is an existing topographical name, the Orient is not). Certain differences, however, are identifiable in the motifs and tropes that populate these imaginary landscapes. The main difference is that the fate of the Balkans has been a more categorical repudiation, while there are quite a number of positive

²Todorova also reminds us that in the ancient Greece the Balkan mainland was the original and exclusive signified of the word ‘Europe’ (Todorova 159)

notions connected to the Orient. One explanation might be the proximity of the former to the Self, in this case Western Europe: the closer to the self the Other is, the stronger the urge is to expel it. Kálmán C. György succinctly summarises this basic difference between attitudes. “The evaluation of Asia and the Balkans is far from being identical. Asia is fearful and mysterious but undoubtedly rich, interesting and original. Balkan means backwardness (not an alternative culture, but the lack of culture), it is unhealthy, dirty (not natural, or close to nature) a mix, mongrel (not original, fundamental). We may be afraid of Asia but certainly consider it special and valuable; Asia is to be exploited and colonised, the Balkans is worthless, should be avoided, it is better not to mix with it.” (Kálmán C. in Fenyvesi et.al. 171; my translation)³

There is nevertheless a serious obstacle that the Self needs to overcome when it comes to the framing of the Eastern European or Balkanite as Other. The process is more problematic than the distancing of the population of Eastern colonies, mainly because in this case we are talking about white people. Katarzyna Murawska-Mathesius describes one dominant strategy of tackling this obstacle:

...deprived as they are, of the discernible, ‘primary’ features of racialised difference such as colour skin or slanting eyes, that is, precisely because of the lack of those features, those images had to articulate some other, ‘secondary’ code of visual stereotypisation suitable for framing the Eastern European Other – to subjectify him or her as whitey but inferior, undershaped, or impure furthermore as corrupt, venal and in a way untrustworthy in his or her whiteness...” (Murawska-Mathesius 4)

She goes on to say that the folk costume has become this secondary signifier, often described as colourful and exotic⁴, but also as ragged and dirty, depending on whether the attitude of the writer was sympathetic or hostile.⁵ A good example is Bram Stoker’s use of this strategy in the opening pages of *Dracula*, where the English traveller, a thorough observer, notes every little detail: the “coloured sheepskins” of the Slovaks, “who were more barbarian than the rest, with

³One should note that the Hungarian and the British perception may differ somewhat: for British people the Balkans are distant enough to still appear as exotic.

⁴Writers very often did not bother to describe the folk costumes of the area where they placed their narrative faithfully to reality. „Gay colours” and the headband of Bulgarian women covered with coins were the most widely known elements, which could appear anywhere. (Goldsworthy)

⁵A slightly different tactic of differentiation on the basis of external features is employed by Ian Fleming in *From Russia with Love*, where the Russian characters are generally ugly, as if it were the manifestation of vice.

their big cow-boy hats, great baggy dirty-white trousers, white linen shirts, and enormous heavy leather belts, nearly a foot wide, all studded over with brass nails.” (Stoker 2) As Murawska-Mathesius puts it, the sheepskin coat became the second skin of the Eastern European man. It might not be mere chance that the sheepskin waistcoat and the bright dress both appear in Bradbury’s text, too, worn by the femme fatale figure of the book. A great deal of emphasis is given to this detail by constant repetition, heightening the exotic, intriguing nature of the character. Another interesting differentiation made by the help of clothes is how the protagonist, Petworth recognises a fellow Englishman in Slaka: “And indeed, close to, it is clear that this suit is not like other suits; the other male garments here and there about the room are only pale approximations to the suit Steadiman wears, which is suit itself...bespeaks an address in Jermyn Street.” (Bradbury 144)

One could claim that globalisation has made this type of differentiation difficult, but its persistence is illustrated by an article in *The Sunday Times* from 2006 by Adrian Anthony Gill. The article, describing the author’s impressions of Albania, was published in The Home/Style column; perhaps this is the reason why the author felt the need to highlight the clothes of the people encountered immediately in the lead paragraph. “Now [Albania] has...the worst-dressed teenagers in Europe.” Later on he elaborates on this claim:

“The difference between [Albanian] kids and their neighbours in Italy and Greece is how they look. With effortless élan, Albanian students are without peer the worst-dressed kids in the western world. They are obsessed with labels and designers, but all they can afford are the chronically laughable rip-offs and fakes in the markets. Shops here are full of absurdly repellent, tatty clobber with oversized logos stencilled on, and the kids wear this stuff with a flashy insouciance, all looking like characters in search of a comic-sketch show.”

He goes on to say that the teenage girls, in their despair to look European, dress like prostitutes - perpetuating the British viewpoint of considering the Balkans as Europe taken to the extremes.

This article, teeming as it is with the long established clichés, deserves a more thorough examination. Its language explicitly suggests that the audience (the British people) will never need a deeper knowledge of Albania than the already accumulated stereotypes, although the

author still provides some further information in order to demonstrate his insider knowledge: “in the unlikely event of your ever needing to know...” The hostility of the implied cultural attitude is appalling, especially when the author sarcastically sneers at the gesture of naming the airport of Tirana after Mother Teresa (one seriously doubts whether this would invite any criticism say, in India, where she spent most of her life) only to add that they had no better choice anyway, having no claim to other famous persons, only infamous ones. The following quote further demonstrates Gill’s expertise in squeezing the largest number of persistent stereotypes into a few lines: “Any sentence with Albania in it is likely to get a laugh. Albania is funny. It’s a punchline, a Gilbert and Sullivan country, a Ruritania of brigands and vendettas and pantomime royalty.” Gill, appallingly, even provides a racial-biological background for the ensuing roster of insulting clichés when offering a description of the typical Albanian physique: “the Albanians are short and ferret-faced, with the unisex stumpy, slightly bowed legs of shetland ponies.” An obvious nonsense like this generalisation would be judged as explicit racism and would entail serious consequences if used to describe the former colonies of Britain. A collective sense of shame felt over colonisation places a certain restriction on such statements, though apparently a sense of superiority is still freely expressible regarding the Balkans.

Taming the Other: Infantilisation

Another easy way of expressing superiority is utilising the adult-child dichotomy, thus infantilising the Other. McClintock elaborates on this phenomenon and explains that from the mid-19th century the trope of the family served to justify imperial intervention by representing racial difference in terms of “a linear, nonrevolutionary progress that naturally contained hierarchy within unity: paternal father ruling benignly over immature children.” (McClintock 45) This view led to the extremely influential idea of equating the child’s growth with human evolution, offering an absolute biological criterion for racial, sexual and class hierarchy. (McClintock 50) This concept and the idea of the ‘primitive’⁶ - a concept formed by anthropology - were readily available to be applied to the Balkans and thereby indicate that its peoples were

⁶ According to the New World Encyclopedia the expression „primitive society” was used in older anthropology texts, although it is avoided in modern anthropology due to „its inherent racist and ethnocentric undertones.”

stuck in earlier stages of civilisation.

The strategy of infantilizing the Balkan other also had less predictable – and perhaps typically English – consequences. In her cultural-anthropological book *Watching the English*, Kate Fox calls attention to the English sense of sympathy and support for the underdog. (Fox 247) This might be one reason why many British people (politicians, travellers) have felt the need to “adopt” certain Balkan peoples and champion their cause (in the 19th century predominantly the cause of independence) on the grounds that they were not able, not qualified to do so on their own. In the international politics of the late 19th century, “Britain had few direct interests within the Balkans, the region [however], was perceived as important to the wider struggle within the great powers.” (Goldsworthy 27) It is not so difficult to picture the parents about to divorce arguing over who should have the child.⁷ Gladstone was one of the most famous public figures who adopted a “pet nation”: he fought for the independence of Bulgaria and stood up against the atrocities supposedly committed by the Turkish army as an answer to a series of revolts. (Goldsworthy 29) Women travellers of the Victorian era were also prone to become the patronesses of certain Balkan countries. Goldsworthy argues that the hidden motive behind this strategy was the perception that the position of small countries in Europe corresponded with the position of women in Britain. Nevertheless, the approach of these women to the object of their sympathy was not always on an equal footing. Edith Durham, traveller, writer, champion of the Albanian cause, idolised the Albanians - saw them as “fearless heroes straight from the pages of Homer” (Goldsworthy 162) – but this did not prevent her from subscribing to the British sense of superiority. As a grown-up observer, her attitude was that of a “sympathetic schoolmistress”; she saw the place as a lost world of childhood.

The retreat of the Ottoman rule brought with it an intriguing turn in the use of the trope of the child. The treatment of the Balkan as Other, non-European did not end with the disappearance of the quintessential Oriental other; the reaction of Western Europe was yet another attempt at distancing, although this time on different grounds. The newly emerging independent Balkan states were becoming targets of ridicule for still being amateurs in the games of diplomacy and statehood. The representation of these states as infantile, bickering children was gaining ground

⁷It is worth noting that the area was crucial for the British, if not due to economic ties then for maintaining the status quo, which had been Britain’s main interest in foreign policy.

towards the end of the 19th century. Goldsworthy explains that “comic writing inherently assumes a greater degree of familiarity with the area it represents, as it depends on a certain level of shared knowledge of a particular Other for its effect. “ (Goldsworthy 113) The first well known example of utilising the comic genre in relation to the Balkans was Bernard Shaw’s play, *Arms and the Man*, followed by H.H Munro’s stories with their romantically idealised landscapes and the topic of war, ‘What Does It Matter’ and ‘The Heart of Bosnia’ by E. M. Forster or Lawrence Durrell’s angry Balkan fiction, just to mention a few. (Goldsworthy 113, 122, 126, 131)

The conviction that the Balkans cannot be trusted to solve its own conflicts continued to persist even into the 1990s. “No one in the West who has seen what is happening in Kosovo can doubt that NATO's military action is justified” – declared Tony Blair in Chicago. (Blair, britishpoliticalspeech.org) Even more telling is the fact that among all the recent crimes against humanity, the Yugoslav war was singled out by the international organisations as the conflict that should be resolved at the International Court of Justice, implying that the Balkan countries were unable to deal with these matters on their own.⁸

The Yugoslav civil war is the topic of Dan Fesperman’s first novel, *Lie in the Dark*, a detective story in the hard boiled tradition. The protagonist Vlado Petric is a Sarajevan homicide investigator (for him, as for the majority of people, origin, language or religion does not matter, that is why he defines himself by his town). In the second year of the siege, when nerves are gradually numbed and people start to forget what life was like before the war, Vlado stumbles upon a corpse in a dark street which turns out to be that of the chief of the interior ministry’s police shot at close range. Vlado’s investigation takes him not to the usual underworld of arms or cigarette trade but much deeper - and at the same time much higher - to the level where high ranking officials cooperate with mafia bosses to operate a network for smuggling artworks out of the country. Finally, to avoid the fate of the victim, he escapes the country, having to resort to crime.

The presence of the NATO and United Nations forces is a mere shadow in the narrative. The reader constantly sees the UN cars and the blue helmeted soldiers through the eyes of the

⁸ According to the online edition of the Britannica Encyclopaedia the cases of Rwanda and Yugoslavia were the first to be dealt with by the International Court of Justice in 50 years. (britannica.com)

protagonist, although they remain conspicuously silent and remote. They appear as a power beyond, or as schoolmasters of whom the children playing around are constantly aware but remain outsiders as long as there is no disorderly conduct. The murder of the police chief constitutes such conduct, so the United Nations immediately intervenes to demand an independent investigator. This is the only reason why Vlado is entrusted with the task. The behaviour of Kasic, the new chief of the interior ministry's police, demonstrates this attitude as he goes out of his way and makes himself ridiculous in trying to please any U.N. officer who happens to be about and to prove how clean the investigation is (even if the officer does not know anything about the case at hand).

The image of children at play is a recurring one throughout the novel. It also makes an appearance in the hobby of the protagonist by which he tries to avert his attention from his circumstances: he spends his evenings painting model soldiers and acting out the great battles of history. One could draw a parallel between this image and *The Toys of Peace*, H.H. Munro's short story, a parable about the adult-Britons who try to persuade the children-Balkan people to play with miniature civilians and the tools of industry instead of soldiers and guns; to teach them to play the game of civilised life instead of that of bloodshed. But in the hands of the children the toys of peace are soon transformed into war games. Similarly, what else could be the pastime of a character from the Balkans, than fantasies of war and mastery? At the same time, the implication is that the Balkans' supposed craving for power should be taken as seriously as the games of children. The same image is conjured up by Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "The Land of Counterpane", which is the protagonist's favourite poem. Here the child spreads out his toys on his sickbed, turning it into his empire of which he is lord and master. Only this time the image is applied to the Serbian army looking down on the city from the surrounding hills that are likened to the rolling surface of the counterpane. Following this logic, the Serbian army possesses the same delusive omnipotence as the child-emperor over his toy empire. The image takes away with one hand what the other has given: asserts the infinite power of the Serbs (which is voyeuristic in nature: they see everything without being seen) but does this by drawing an equation mark between them and Stevenson's sick child.

In stark contrast with the tone of Fesperman, Bradbury's text often subverts existing preconceptions and at the same time consciously repeats others, this way calling attention to their

familiarity as stereotypes. The traditional representation of Westerners in the East is that of the confident traveller, scholar or diplomat, who, thanks to his intellectual superiority, easily copes with the harsh circumstances. “[The] familiarity, not merely with the language of the people of the East but their customs, their feeling, their traditions, their history and religion, our capacity to understand what may be called the genius of the East...”, to borrow Lord Curzon Indian Viceroy’s words (Curzon qtd. in Said 197), helps him or her to understand the place, even to blend in to a certain extent – something that is unimaginable the other way around. Said also points out that the British colonisers had an education-based approach to their colonies. In *Rates of Exchange*, the authority of the British protagonist, an educator, is immediately undermined by the introduction. The language employed to describe him reminds one of anthropological descriptions. Anthropology, yet another Western European discipline, was established to scientifically describe and define the Other. The very attempt to subject the Balkans and Eastern Europe to anthropological scrutiny points to their status as Other. This time, however, it is the English cultural visitor who is objectified, labelled and put into the right drawer.

“He is a man who is styleless; he wears an old safari suit, its pockets packed with pens and paper, Christmas present socks of a tedious rhomboidal design, and flat earth shoes; there is a certain baldness to his head where, in a better world hair would be. He is white and male, forty and married, bourgeois and British...He is a man to whom life has been kind, and he has paid the price for it. No military adventures enter his history, and he as struggled for no causes, taken no part in any revolutions. When the world went to war in the forties, he lay in a cot and played with soft toys; when the young in the fifties rebelled over Suez and Hungary, he played cricket for his school.” (Bradbury 19)

The implied message is: Ladies and Gentlemen, here is a fine English male specimen...⁹ Alienation is achieved through various strategies; for instance, the narrator does not allow us to be absorbed in the world of the narrative, we are frequently reminded that we are reading a story: “Indeed, a brilliant, batik-clad, magical realist novelist Katya Princip will remark, somewhat later in this narrative...” or “Perhaps we should leave Petworth for a moment and find the toilet as he deals with these questions...” (Bradbury 19, 265) Moreover, in the quote above a distinctly British emotion is manifested, namely the sense that they have been left out of events in the second half of the 20th century that Eastern, South – Eastern Europeans have experienced. They

⁹There is, however, a crucial difference between anthropological descriptions in general and this example. While anthropological language strives to inflict a sense of timelessness on its object, Bradbury’s text places the protagonist in a historical context.

are the bearers of a cultural knowledge, some sort of wisdom unavailable to the British. Bényei Tamás phrases this in the following manner:

“...the knowledge of the English somehow seems to be insufficient to comprehend and come to terms with the experiences of the 20th century, thus they easily fall prey to their own fantasies of Otherness. English characters are manipulated not so much by foreigners, rather than by the myth of their own innocent Otherness, and rooted in this myth, the anxieties and desires triggered by foreignness.” (Bényei 150, my translation)

Bradbury’s “hero,” Dr Petworth, arrives in Eastern Europe with educational purposes, to give lectures on the English language. Slaka is “sometimes here, often further north and sometimes not at all” (Bradbury qtd. in Goldsworthy 122), but definitely behind the iron curtain. When it comes to his attitude, nothing is further from the self confidence of Lord Curzon. This Westerner in Bradbury’s novel is completely lost, and at the mercy of his hosts. The depiction of power relations can be approached from different angles here. On the one hand, it is a subversion of the trope of the confident British expert, on the other hand it repeats the pattern laid down in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, where the British solicitor first receives baleful warnings in connection with his destination, then, after his arrival, falls completely under the spell of his host and becomes a prisoner in the castle of Dracula. Petworth is also reminded that in Slaka he would constantly be observed and spied on, which awakens uneasiness in him, just like in Jonathan Harker. Furthermore, Petworth is repeatedly warned about and threatened with prolonged confinement in Slaka should he behave improperly. Repeating the patterns of Stoker’s emblematic text powerfully exposes their stereotypical nature.

The power relations are established right upon his arrival (the infantilisation begins even during his flight, when he notes that the people remind him of his childhood¹⁰ and the stewardess appears as a “severe mother”): he is interrogated, patronised and lectured about the pronunciation of Slakan words from the first moment by Lubijova, his guide and translator, who, moreover, does not hesitate to imply that she knows all the typical characteristics of English people. “Perhaps you are shy, like all English” (Bradbury 63) Above all, a primary source of humour is provided by Petworth’s treatment as a naughty child by Lubijova, who does not miss a single opportunity to reprimand him for his appearance, manners, incompetence or disobedience. Here

¹⁰This remark refers at the same time to the backwardness of the people in question with their pre-synthetic, old fashioned clothes.

is an example from Petworth's very first day in Slaka, when he is late for his appointment with Lubijova, and has failed to collect his passport on top of all: "Oh Petwurt, can't you do just one thing? Now you are not a person, is that what you want? ...I'll go and ask now, bring your coat. I think you don't try very hard. Here you must fight a bit. Go, be quick!" (Bradbury 109)

Petworth, despite being a professor of linguistics, is no master of language at all here. While Slakan characters talk endlessly, he hardly ever makes an utterance that is longer than two lines. Though he is the one who has arrived there to educate, in Slaka he is the pupil whom everyone wants to teach something - and most of them really have a lesson to teach. Their power over him is manifested in various ways. As it was pointed out earlier, naming also presupposes power. Petworth is (partially or wholly) renamed throughout the narrative to Petwurt, Petwit, even Pervert (this might also be a mocking comment on the characters' command of English as well as on the English habit of mispronouncing and misspelling 'exotic' names). Plitplov (a character who wants to appear as sombre, secretive and extremely important, but rather resembles a parody of a spy from a Cold War spy movie) is his first self-made patron who reminds him in an over-confidential manner that they have already met in England. As the narrative unfolds, Plitplov releases more and more of the information that he seems to possess about Petworth's life - especially about his wife. She has apparently become very confidential, even intimate with Plitplov, discussing with him how unhappy she is in her marriage - something Petworth has always been aware of in the back of his mind, but never wanted to face.¹¹

His next tutor is the magical realist writer Katya Princip, the femme fatale figure of the narrative. After their first meeting at a dinner, she enchants him to such an extent that she can take him wherever she wants - she makes him disrupt his schedule and elope with her to spend an afternoon together. Her lesson is to "give [him] a better sense of existence." (Bradbury 297) and the aim is to make him aware of his long suppressed desires; to prove that his dull life with a disaffected wife is not the normal state of affairs. She is also the one who reminds him of his prejudices. The following conversation between Princip and Petworth is about everyday difficulties: small apartments, bad heating, unreliable services. "Of course you do not have such problems in your country." "I suppose not," says Petworth. "Really, do you say so?" (Bradbury

¹¹This may also be interpreted as a comment on the fact that images created by the mechanisms of othering tell more about the creator than the created.

209) She points out that he, being British, can afford to be blind to the dysfunctional or insensible aspects in his country by idealising it, compared to “inferior” cultures. Princip’s character provides yet another opportunity for Bradbury to subvert and repeat stereotypes at the same time. Though the above mentioned inversion in the relation of student and teacher is clearly a subversive element, the femme fatale is a cliché in itself. The fact that it is still Slaka where the protagonist’s life is turned upside down and he is dragged into unexpected sexual adventures he cannot even imagine at home reproduces the motif of relocating the unacceptable and the sexualisation of the Other.

Fear of the Other: The tropes of paranoia, infection and sexuality

Besides the idealisation of the culture of the Self, the feeling of fear over its possible degeneration due to the influences of the Other is still widely discernible. Again, let me refer to *Dracula*, this key text in establishing stereotypes. The count is planning to invade England, to assimilate into English society, and then to degrade it by turning its inhabitants into his own image. What we witness is a fantasy of reverse colonisation, the product of the paranoid fear that imperialist practices may be brought home. Dracula’s method of sucking away his victim’s lifeblood but letting her live just to be able to return and drink again shows a parallel with the methods of imperialism. In order to see the nature of this fear more clearly, let us look at Tony Blair’s speech again, the title of which is "Doctrine of the International Community." Here he argues for the inevitability of international cooperation, since no country can be treated in isolation any more. He also supports his argument with examples:

“Many of our domestic problems are caused on the other side of the world. Financial instability in Asia destroys jobs in Chicago and in my own constituency in County Durham. Poverty in the Caribbean means more drugs on the streets in Washington and London. Conflict in the Balkans causes more refugees in Germany and here in the US.”

The implied prejudice is apparent in these sentences. Global problems can only mean that the so-called Third World (and areas that are constituted in the imagination as belonging to the Third World) causes difficulties for and in the First. The possibility that the First World may negatively

influence (or have influenced) the Other does not emerge at all. Globalisation has perceptibly heightened the fear of the other; in the 19th century, overseas colonies did not constitute a physical threat to the homeland due to their distance from Britain. The Other that was perceived as menacing owing to its proximity was the Balkans - geographically and psychologically too, as Nenad Popović, the Croatian philosopher and essayist observes (Popović in Fenyvesi et.al. 287). Unrest in the Balkans, even under Ottoman rule, has always immediately triggered fascination in Britain, although the British political interest was always indirect (the Balkans was seen as a playground for power games between Russia and Britain). When the primary Other was the Ottoman Empire, and Southern Slav people were seen as victims of oppression, British public figures (and public opinion in their wake) as previously referred to, often adopted a favourite who was then presented as the epitome of oppression, the victim of abuse deserving freedom. After gaining independence, the Slavic population inherited the role of the Other viewed as uncivilised, brutal, constantly warring. Todorova also notes that the British travellers of the period were especially prone to generalisation, writing about “wild and lawless countries between the Adriatic and the Black Seas”, “hotbeds of outlawry and brigadier.” (Todorova 117) The regicide in Belgrade in 1903 and the second Balkan war in 1912 seem to have settled the perception of the area for decades to come. It was spelt out that there was a fundamental difference between European and Balkan moral standards “without a second thought about the English performance in South Africa, the Indian continent or Ireland.” The opinion was born then that the Balkans, “the powder keg of Europe” is able to set the whole of Europe on fire any time. What is more, public opinion has held them responsible not only for the First World War (“the crime of the Balkans”) but even for the appearance of fascism. John Gunther, writer of the popular *Inside Europe* expressed what was public opinion: “It is an intolerable affront to human and political nature that these wretched and unhappy little countries in the Balkan peninsula can, and do, have quarrels that cause world wars. (Gunther in Todorova 119) As for fascism, the step of making the Balkans responsible for it is more difficult to take, but American writer Robert Kaplan pulled it off nevertheless in *The Balkan Ghosts*. He claims that it was a Balkan phenomenon since Hitler was of Austrian origin, and Austria had had long established connections to the Balkans.¹² (Kaplan 51) Apparently, the deep conviction in European civilisation could not come to terms

¹² Goldsworthy also remarks that „no one would think of blaming the hapless Balkans for the triumphs of Austria’s composers” (Goldsworthy 7)

neither with the incredible, gratuitous bloodshed of the Great War nor with the unfathomably cold and deep inhumanity of the Holocaust. According to one popular approach these horrors cannot be the product of enlightened, humanist countries. Popović describes the phenomenon in the following manner: “It is better to be afraid of the Balkans than to be scared of ourselves. The Balkan Peninsula helps to localise, territorialise the inside horror, the European trauma whose name is the 20th century.” (Popovic qtd. in Fenyvesi et.al. 287; my translation) Despite efforts of revisionist philosophy in the second half of the 20th century, attempts are still made to extrapolate inner contents onto the Other. An example of this is the 2007 edition of a history book entitled *A History of Eastern Europe. Crisis and Change* by Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries. The authors opine that the failure of democracy in Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the interwar years was what undermined the peace treaties and facilitated the expansion of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. (Bideleux, Jeffries 319)

Kaplan’s use of the words “breeding ground” and “infectious” tellingly reveal the concept of the Balkans as a hotbed of contagious disease. This disease is spread not only by means of war but, especially nowadays, through immigration. The fear of immigration from Eastern Europe was present from the beginning of the 20th century (again, a threat of invasion embodied by Dracula). In the US powerful lobby groups argued for immigration restriction in the 1920s, “or else the American race would be committing suicide.” (Todorova 126) The Gill article quoted above elaborates on this topic as well informing the reader that one quarter of Albanians (approximately one million people) work abroad “and what they do is mostly illegal.” The laughable picture that Gill paints of Albanians is in stark contrast with the other side of the coin: the representation of them as dreadful criminals who have managed to get their hands on the organised crime throughout Europe, consequently implying that the Europeans in question are not involved. The discrepancy between being comically helpless at home and the impersonators of vice abroad is not resolved, only the implication remains that crimes committed in Britain have little to do with the British, and much more with the Other within.

The shameful conduct of Eastern European immigrants is the topic of an article of the MailOnline as well, entitled “To Eastern Europeans legal is anything they can get away with” by Alexander Boot, published on 21 January 2012. He argues that “[h]ardly a day goes by without the newspapers reporting a crime committed by a recent arrival from Eastern Europe or what’s now called the former USSR. This reflects the statistics showing these immigrants do contribute

more than their fair share to the UK crime rate.” (The question arises though whether the ratio of crimes committed by British people and immigrants covered in the media corresponds to the ratio in reality, or whether a crime committed by an immigrant is more likely to get a headline.) The author points out the existence of the difference between Eastern and Western morality, the reason of which is communism. He explains that the communist regime resulted in a different culture which is totally corrupted. People are trained in their pram that all morality is relative and they are unfamiliar with the concept of truth. This has resulted in the emergence of a “new psycho-cultural type, the Homo Communisticus,” who had to fight for survival in the harsh circumstances, so “intuitive respect for the law just isn’t part of Eastern Europeans’ psychological or cultural makeup.” The use of the Latin term suggests biologically determined characteristics and constitutes a gesture of extreme alienation. The article follows the tradition of scientific description of the Other, as in the anthropology of the 19th century. Furthermore, the treatment of Eastern European immigrants is very similar to the way aggression in the area is represented and explained in general. When, according to another approach, the Second World War is treated as a European phenomenon, it is seen as “extreme aberrations...of the otherwise rational, liberal and predictable polity of the West.” As opposed to this, the causes of violence in the Balkans are always sought in historical factors and in the make-up of the local population. For example, the Yugoslav war (like any other act of aggression) was only to be expected as a natural outcome of a warrior ethos. (For example, according to one possible explanation the Serbs were settled down by the Habsburgs due to their ability as warriors and were granted special privileges for defending the borders from the Ottomans.) Balkan violence is thus more archaic, and born out of clan societies, and fuelled by cultural traditions. (Todorova 137) The argument neatly chimes with that of the *DailyMail* article. Of course the implication is not the injustice of all charges, but sweeping generalisations like these supported by pseudo-scientific explanations are especially dangerous, since no one is guaranteed innocence until proven guilty.

The pervasive fear of the threat of contamination is very much present both in the plotline and on the level of language in Fesperman’s text. He repeats the conventions of paranoia in connection with the Balkans, only raised to a higher level. Here the fear that the Balkans would draw all Europe into its violent conflicts is replaced by engulfing the whole world, represented by the international forces of the NATO and UN. It was previously claimed that their viewpoint does not appear in the narrative. Showing the events from a native’s point of view enables the

narration to indicate that corruption starts from the inside, drawing in and implicating the international forces. From the story of Milan Glavas, the former museum curator, we learn how artworks that were previously “lent out” to private houses, with the record of locations meticulously kept, now draw the attention of army officials and gangsters. They know that in the confusion of the war they can easily lay their hands on them and sell them to eager collectors around the world. However, shipment is the sole privilege of the UN, though, as Glavas explains “the UN is not so great an obstacle” “with a few Deutschmarks here and there.” (Fesperman 180)

Likening war and violence to a disease also appears in the text: “...they had assumed that...it would pass like a strong fever, killing or breaking. Instead it had become a long illness that took its toll in slow measures and...the prognosis wasn’t likely to change anytime soon.” (Fesperman 235) Moreover, it is suggested several times that, compared with the World Wars, the Yugoslav conflict is worst of all. After a visit to the frontlines in the hills, Vlado muses on “the random, aimless nature of it all.” Compared to the accounts he has read about the First World War, where an underlying plan of the massacre was discernible, “every massive wave of murder was premeditated” (Fesperman 262) - as opposed to the Yugoslav war, “a beast with every limb disabled,” devoid of a sense of command and control, snipers taking people out of boredom, and random rifle exchanges turning into personal vendettas. (It is worth noting that after the textualisation of the events in the First World War, it was easier to read it as something purposeful and understandable.) As far as the artworks are concerned, in Glavas’ opinion the local forces perform even better than the Nazis in doing away with them, but this time recovery would be nearly impossible due to the legendary enmities of neighbouring peoples where everybody blames everybody else. And indeed, finding the reasons to steal “a glimpse of that machinery” of war and the people who fuel and drive it is one of the most often repeated desires of the protagonist in his impotent despair. The war is imagined by him as a pulsing underground machinery “barely contained by the seams of the horizon.” (Fesperman 140) This image carries the potential of an explosion that would spread the violence beyond the horizon and into the world.

On the textual level, paranoia is manifested, for instance, in the use of the word ‘empire’ and the countless images of border crossing. The word ‘empire’ appears in the book in the most varied circumstances. The characters seem to be intent on expansion no matter what they are

doing. Galvas, when talking about the ever growing number of artworks handled by him, concludes that “everything progressed smoothly, my empire growing all the while.” Another relevant example is provided by an episode involving Vlado’s friend, an entrepreneur who has recognised the people’s need of entertainment even during a siege, whose “office [is] throbbing with the pulse of the two generators that kept his business empire going...” Vlado’s hobby has already been mentioned earlier as an instance of yearning for power coupled with the trope of the child. Applying the language of aggressive political expansionism to everyday aspects of life may be seen as yet another gesture of generalisation, as the inclusion of everyday people in the fight for territory, furthermore, as a fear of the potential imperialistic ambitions of the Other, mentioned in connection with *Dracula*.

Very similar mechanisms are at work in connection with the images of border crossing as well. The text is very rich in both figurative and actual instances of border crossing. When used in the figurative sense, the image is essentially a signal of hazard, of entering a danger zone, something yet unknown, but surely malicious for the protagonist. For instance after receiving a lethal warning to mind his own business, Vlado concludes that “he had run afoul of these new, uncertain rules, by crossing some unseen boundary in the dark.” (Fesperman 115); or on the way towards the most notorious frontline the narration informs us that “[t]he tape ejected from the machine with a click that signalled the crossing of some invisible line,” (Fesperman 244) and they soon find themselves in the middle of the shelling. This also applies to the actual violations of boundaries, for example when Vlado sneaks over to the other side of the river that divides the Serbian- and the Bosnian-ruled parts of the city. Exposing the local protagonist to mortal danger whenever he transgresses an actual or figurative line may be interpreted as a sign of the covert Western viewpoint and thus a warning, or punishment of an act that is perceived as threatening from this perspective. The final act of border crossing is Vlado’s own escape from the country, however, it is crucial to note that this happens with the consent and help of a British figure, a journalist without whom Vlado would not be able to solve the case. Yet, the escape still involves crime and is thus threatening, since he hides in the crate of a painting that is being smuggled from the country.

Despite being a comedy, Bradbury’s text also plays with the theme of paranoia. The atmosphere is set even before Petworth’s arrival: in England he is reminded that half of the

population is employed by the secret police to spy on the other half. As a communist country, it is emphasized that constant surveillance is part of the locals' life, and affects foreigners as well. It is repeated so often in stock phrases, that it becomes a firm presence in Petworth's mind, so he cannot imagine the city in other terms. "No trams move, the dark city moves quietly in itself, a place of dangers and treacheries, courages and cowardices, deceits and late-night arrests." (Bradbury 100) Paranoia proves to be infectious, as we can see in the case of Steadiman, a diplomat in Slaka, who usually goes doubly out of his way to deceive his followers. Moreover, he is convinced that traffic rules are crazy and people drive insanely - in reality he is the greatest danger on the roads. (This echoes Gill's opinion according to which "Albania has by far and away the worst traffic record of any western country.") As for the acquaintances of our hero, he is warned again and again that he cannot trust anybody- except the one who utters the warning. However, the only truly suspicious figure is Plitplov, who is persistently at the visitor's heels, muddying the water with his ridiculous over-secretiveness. Towards the end of the book it is made clear that the sense of threat is not without foundation. Bradbury chooses to repeat the cliché about the untrustworthiness of Eastern Europeans. All the mess around Petworth, and probably Princip's fervent attraction towards him served the purpose of compromising him, so Plitplov is able to blackmail the professor into taking Princip's new book to France to a translator and returning to Slaka with the money. By this time Katya Princip's name is seen in a new light. The allusion to Gavrilo Princip in connection with a trivial sex scandal of somebody who "is not a person of any great interest at all" (Bradbury 19) may be seen as a sarcastic subversion of the British stereotype about the Balkans as "troublemaker." Here, just like in the popular imagination, the locals scheme to entangle the British character in their malicious games.

Of which Petworth is hardly aware, since he is having the time of his life. I have referred to the relocation of sexual fantasies of the Self (or more generally anything regarded as unacceptable), which also follows a rich tradition. Postcolonial theory has pointed out long ago in connection with Orientalism that "[it] takes a perverse shape as a male power fantasy that sexualises the feminised Other for Western power and possession." (McClintock 14) Furthermore, Said argues that the Orient existed in the imagination of the British as the land where the most exciting sexual adventures are available, which are "perhaps more libertine and less guilt ridden." (Said 191) The Orient is also a metaphor for the forbidden. Todorova notes that the tendency is less spectacular in the treatment of the Balkans due to the violent, masculine

brigand bravado that is associated with it. (Todorova 15) However, the area is still a popular site of forbidden desires, taboos or aberrations.¹³ Goldsworthy illustrates the “degree to which British writers could use Ruritanian fantasies as a way of subverting a variety of taboos and satisfying hidden desires” with E. M. Forster’s homosexual fantasies¹⁴ set in an imaginary Balkan country Pottobakia. (Goldsworthy 127) His erotic short story ‘What Does it Matter?’, for instance, tells the story of the president’s homosexual adventure with a young man of exceptional beauty. Krzysztof Fordoński explains in his essay *E. M. Forster’s Geography of Homosexual Desire* that, homosexuality being forbidden in England, educated, wealthy British people found other sites for their homosexual desire, which at the turn of the century were primarily Italy and Greece. (Fordoński 1) Goldsworthy discloses that among the few words of Balkan origin in the English language we find “buggery” and “vampire”, both denoting a sexual taboo. (Goldsworthy 73) The locus of the Gothic is also that of the margins of the familiar civilised world. However, within this tradition the foreign location is chosen to accommodate fearful sexuality, has the potential to contaminate and overpower. Gill’s anxious remark in his article “[t]he number and proportion of young people in Tirana is a shock” curiously evokes Said’s conclusion he draws from the process of depriving the Arabs of any characteristic considered positive in Europe: “what is really left to the Arab after all is said and done is an undifferentiated sexual drive ... the Arab produces himself, endlessly, sexually, and little else.” (Said 311) In this respect a clear parallel is observable between this motif of Orientalism and Gill’s treatment of Albanians.

The way Bradbury handles the theme of projection is similar to the representation of other stereotypes in the book: while some aspects are repeated, others are inverted. It is still the Eastern European country where the unexpected happens, leaving the protagonist with the sensation that his life is tumbled upside down. This is mockingly familiar from the Victorian romances set in a Balkan (or Eastern European) scenery although in the traditional plotline the everyday British character always masters the situation and accomplishes heroic and demanding tasks without any previous preparation. The trendsetting example is Anthony Hope’s *Prisoner of Zenda*, where the British protagonist happens to be extremely alike the king of a minor, backward European country, Ruritania. By the end of the story, Rudolph replaces the kidnapped king, wins

¹³A phenomenon that appeared after the regime change in Eastern Europe undeniably proves this, namely the immense popularity of Eastern European countries among the British as stag party destinations.

¹⁴After 1910 Forster began to write a series of erotic short stories and a play titled ‘The Heart of Bosnia’ (Goldsworthy 127)

the heart of the princess, proves to be a more capable ruler than the original, rescues the king and gallantly relinquishes the throne and the princess to him. Hope has found quite a number of followers in this vein.¹⁵ In stark contrast with this, Petworth is a tragicomical victim of the circumstances and his guides, having no control over the events. Being literally dragged about by various characters establishes his resemblance to a rag doll. An epitome of this is the scene where Budgie, the English diplomat's wife hysterically wants to have sex with Petworth grabbing his trousers while her husband tries to rescue the professor by holding him in an armlock and hauling him out of the apartment. Something similar happens when Princip takes his hand and pulls him on a tram against his better judgement.

The attention women pay to the quite unattractively described Petworth is also noteworthy. In the narrative Petworth is the object of sexual desire for various female characters. If we take McClintock's definition quoted above, we could argue that the protagonist is feminised to a certain extent by being forced into the passive role. In *Rates of Exchange* the women are the active agents, desiring to possess, while the male is the "new land to be conquered." Princip's intentions behind seducing Petworth also fit nicely into the analogy of colonisation: conquering prepares the field for exploitation- using him to take her book abroad. At the same time, this line of reasoning takes us back to the corrupting potential of the Other, and the motifs of the Gothic.

Who are we talking about? - The gothic mode and the discourse of Balkanisation

Goldsworthy explains that the growing activity of the press and the frequent newspaper coverage of the Balkans "began to make it appear closer to home, the peninsula became the background against which popular writers projected the anxieties brought about by the greater speed of travel and the increasing fears of invasion and war." (Goldsworthy 74) Since the Gothic necessarily has to linger on the border of the familiar, the lands perceived as the edges of Europe provided a perfect setting: scarcely known enough to be able to house "every known superstition in the world" (Stoker 1) and the enemy jeopardising the integrity of the Self. The nature of the borderline is both figurative (familiar-unfamiliar, nature-supernatural, etc.) and actual: the edges

¹⁵Among others Hilda Gregg (alias Sydney C. Grier), F. O. H. Nash, Agatha Christie, Dorothea Gerard, H. H. Munro were inspired by Hope. (Goldsworthy 44-68)

of a particular geographical area, as in *Dracula* where the count's castle is located in the farthest corner of Transylvania, the name of which means 'beyond the forest', a frontier itself.¹⁶

Bradbury consciously plays with this cliché in *Rates of Exchange*, drawing attention to its status as stereotype. Petworth is taken to Glit, this idyllic, medieval town "through the forest" where a castle awaits him too, to be visited¹⁷. Its location in or beyond the forest is emphasized so many times that it has a comical effect. Petworth's helpless passivity even evokes Jonathan Harker who is considerably feminised by the role of 'the kidnapped princess in the castle' that is forced onto him. Moreover, the start of his journey also conjures up *Dracula*, since Petworth is venturing to a place (he does not know exactly where, as "his geography collapses East of the Rhine" (Bradbury 28)) where the prospect of imprisonment is a very real one.

The gothicness of Fesperman's spaces is much more serious, sinister even. The quintessential locus of the gothic, the ruin (of castles, monasteries) is transported into the 20th century to adopt the form of the destroyed city. The effect is enhanced by the bleak winter fogs and the mud, this liminal element covering the streets. The city's double nature, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, is accentuated when the characters' memories of a lifetime are imprinted in their entirety on the carcasses of buildings and spaces, but the two cannot overlap; the torn-up buildings symbolise the collapse of the boundary between interior and exterior. The borderline on which the gothic is situated is a crucial motif: a border tears through the city itself and becomes a question of life and death. Sara Wasson notes that the modern city's architecture and dark labyrinth have come to stand for the menace of the gothic castle and forest; its chill of fear of ghosts is replaced by the horror of human violence. (Wasson 4) Both aspects are increased to an almost unbearable level in *Lie in the Dark*. The labyrinth of the streets is covered by complete darkness for lack of electricity, the gaping ruins offer no protection any more, but threaten with collapsing onto passers-by and expose them to the snipers. The city resembles more a wilderness with its law of

¹⁶Hope's Ruritania is also a 'land beyond the forest'. The protagonist claims that he can reach the capital in one day from Dresden through the forest. (Goldsworthy 46)

¹⁷The discourse of the 'picturesque' is also evoked in this passage in the description of the scenery. Goldsworthy suggests that the Balkan landscape was beheld not only as a site of the gothic, but as a niche of untouched, wild nature where British people could escape from the ruins of industrialisation- here backwardness becomes a positive characteristic, as in the opening passages of *Dracula*. The sublime mountains with their wild and noble tribes and warrior ethos is a frequently returning romantic fantasy. In travelogues the adjective 'picturesque' became a catchphrase „used to construct almost single-handedly a colourful 'Balkan' backdrop." (Goldsworthy 64) In Fesperman's narrative this romantic cliché becomes strangely twisted: the 'authentic landscape' is scarred by trenches and craters, and instead of the noble mountain men we find the Serb army burrowing in the hills and destroying the city from the distance.

the strongest, however, the violence is human indeed: the cold, bored and random slaughter is kept up by the mostly faceless, demonised Serb snipers. In Wasson's words, "the attacks destroy the very fabric of society," (Wasson 5) people appear like animals fleeing from the predator as a sniper attacks, burrowing in their shelters; and indeed, as Wasson explains, during the Second World War a tangible fear was present that the underground shelters may degenerate the population into "troglodyte beings." (Wasson 5) She also comments on how the familiar structures of the city hide unexpected horrors in the carnivalesque times of war. (Wasson 4) The narrative starts with such an instance: several people in a soccer field - a fairly everyday phenomenon. However, the readers are informed that the field has been turned into a graveyard and the men are gravediggers, burying the last night's dead.

The traditional trope of the gothic, namely the struggle to escape a confined space, is a key element of the narrative. "The world had been so large then, even if the city had been smaller...Now the air only seemed stale and confined, which Vlado knew made no sense." The shrinking of space affects the personal level as well: "Behind him, in the small living room and kitchen was all that remained of Vlado's prewar world." (Fesperman 138, 13) The thought of escaping this claustrophobia and the numbing futility of hope haunts the protagonist. The opportunity does come, and an interesting parallel appears between the circumstances of Vlado's escape and Dracula's invasion of England. Both are facilitated by an Englishman, additionally, the crate in which Vlado hides resembles the count's boxes of hallowed earth he needs to rest. Even their status conjures up similarities when approached from a Western point of view. Vlado is an ambivalent figure: on the one hand he is the sympathetic protagonist enjoying the support of the reader. On the other hand, he is a representative of that dangerous, uncivilised species, the Homo Communisticus, whose invasion many Westerners are dreading.

It is well known that the gothic is a mode of writing through which the anxieties of the Self are expressible by talking about the Other. The discourse of 'Balkanism' became such a mode for the British (and the West). Goldsworthy argues in connection with Algernon Swinburne's "The Ballad of Bulgarie" that "it is not about 'Bulgarie' at all, but rather about the prominent 'Balkan crusaders' in British public life... a good example of the way in which works allegedly dealing with Balkan themes frequently say much more about facets of British political and intellectual history." She continues with Byron and Shelley (the main Balkan poets) "who viewed the Balkan struggle against the background of the French Revolution, as an emancipatory struggle against

tyranny.” (Goldsworthy 40) It has already been indicated earlier that the Balkans is often considered a topic “free for all” without concerns about political correctness. Since for instance the language of the articles analyzed here would certainly be unacceptable when applied to Britain’s former colonies, the question arises whether the fascination with the Balkans is an outlet for the still perceivable racism in British society. In this sense, the tradition of the romance or the spy story with a Balkan setting may also be regarded as an instance of the literary exploitation of the area. For Lawrence Durrell’s, John Buchan’s or Ian Fleming’s heroes the area is a playground for showcasing their superiority and potential. (Goldsworthy 91)

I have already mentioned a few words of Balkan origin in the English language. One of the most popular coinages is ‘balkanisation.’ The origin and application of this word provide a fairly recent example of evoking the Balkans to refer to a different topic. The primary and most widespread definition is “the process of nationalist fragmentation of former geographic and political units into new and problematically viable small states.” (Todorova 32) (Interestingly enough, the word appeared much later than the actual disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, at the end of the First World War) However, the process of decontextualisation started almost immediately, thus the term came to stand for the various negative characteristics associated with the Balkans in the popular imagination. “The Italian modern dictionary...explained it entirely as a synonym for despotism, revolutions, counterrevolutions, guerrilla warfare, and assassinations, “frequently found in the Balkan countries (and elsewhere).” (Todorova 33) The end of this process is the absolute disengagement of the term from the area, meaning *any* negative notion the writer intends to articulate from devastation to dehumanisation.¹⁸

The term was introduced and spread by journalism, thus I shall have a look at more recent accounts and examine their frequency and context in some British newspapers. There are abundant examples for the primary usage, especially nowadays, when many European countries have to face separatist activity. An article in *The Economist* titled “The Balkanisation of Britain?” draws a parallel between Britain and the former Yugoslavia, suggesting that Scottish secession might have far more serious consequences than what is expected. Interestingly, the word is often used to describe efforts to control or restrict free access to information on the internet. This is the main concern of the MondayNote in the article titled “Creeping Balkanisation is the internet’s

¹⁸ We can witness a side effect of this phenomenon: associating the new meanings attached to the word with the geographical area in return. By this counter-effect the expression becomes a powerful means of relocating negative characteristics.

worst enemy.” It is worth noting, however, that the title does not clarify the intended meaning at all, only the tone of the words ‘creeping’ and ‘enemy’ suggests that ‘balkanisation’ means something dreadful. A similar message is articulated in *The Independent*: “One of Google’s most senior executives issued a stark warning tonight that the power of the internet to free some of the world’s most oppressed people risks being overturned by autocratic governments who seek to “Balkanise” the web by controlling what can be accessed.” Here synonyms may be ‘jeopardise’, ‘threaten’, ‘aberrate.’ The expression is thought to aptly describe the economic crisis as well; the wording of the two following excerpts is almost the same: “...new policy mistakes from the central government and increasing capital flight and balkanisation of Spain’s financial markets.”; “Just consider what must be overcome: economic divergence and deepening recessions; irreversible balkanization of the banking system and financial markets”- this time in connection with Greece. (guardian.co.uk) Yet another article laments the disempowerment of teachers as “the balkanisation of the teaching profession.” (independent.co.uk) Examining the search results on the Guardian’s online edition reveals a yearly fluctuation in the frequency of the expression, but still adding up to 141 hits in the past 13 years in the most various contexts, in a period when the attention of the world was not directed towards the Balkans.

If we return to the two narratives discussed here, we can conclude that both end in a locus and moment of transition: the last scene in *Rates of Exchange* is Heathrow Airport and, though Petworth is returning to his ordinary life after this brief carnivalistic period in Slaka, his identity is much changed. Bradbury indicates this by referring to him as Stupid, the protagonist of Princip’s little tale she starts telling when they first meet. She assumes the role of Scheherazade by leaving her tale unfinished, thus (in yet another instance of exoticising) holding the attention of her audience firmly in her grip. The change of identity, however, goes against the Balkanist (and Orientalist) discourse, since it has always been a crucial concern of travellers and colonisers to distance themselves from the local culture, not to let the influence of the Other stain them. (Said 284) Fresperman leaves his protagonist while he is peering out of his box and the window of the airplane as the city is receding from view. The image of the gravediggers appearing in the last sentence forms a frame around the narrative and creates a false sense of completeness to counterbalance the transition realised by the journey. The reader is left alone to ponder on what will happen to Vlado when he is discovered and becomes one of the innumerable illegal immigrants fleeing the former Yugoslavia.

Conclusion

In this essay my aim was to point out the contradictory treatment of the Balkans and Eastern Europe by the West and, more closely, Britain. Postcolonial theory has directed attention to the mechanisms of Orientalism as an instrument of imperialism. Analysing the widespread phenomenon of applying a very similar discursive mechanism to a part of Europe that is perceived as inauthentic, different and therefore potentially dangerous for the idealised Western European Self due to its proximity and connections to the East (the epitome of which was the Ottoman Empire) is an equally urgent task. After examining fairly recent texts concerning the Balkans and Eastern Europe, we find that devices originating in Orientalism, like anthropological definition, projection and infantilisation still find their way into contemporary discourse. One might summarize that Goldsworthy's concluding sentence (whose research covered the period up to the mid-20th century) is still largely valid: "In politics, as in literature Ruritania outlives Hope." (Goldsworthy 212) We still encounter statements displaying the long established stereotypes associated with the region, even so extreme ones as differentiation on biological grounds. It is also true, though, that revisionist efforts are younger than, for example, postcolonial theory. Thus, it is also essential to consider the subversive voices that realise the constructed nature of these artefacts and preconceptions and strive to reveal this by dismantling them. The map is to a large extent still drawn and populated by the imagination, but persistent attempts at raising consciousness may eventually lift the fog of the myth.

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